

THE SHIFT IN PERCEPTION: WESTERN SOAP IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Serials are a major source of entertainment throughout the world and every country produces its own variety to satisfy its audiences. Same is the case in India, which produces heaps of television serials in its national as well as its various regional languages, for its own native audiences. These serials address to the highly emotional stratum of the audience, and are noted for its over-weighed melodrama. In this context, the western media texts play a very significant role in the audiences' perception. High technical and aesthetic quality of these texts makes it attractive to the audiences. Under such circumstances, the consumers for the western produced series are on the rise in the country. The new and younger generation is chiefly responsible for this new trend. The present research paper ensues into this shift in audiences' interest and the factors that pave way for this new trend to seep in.

KEYWORDS: Reception, Audience, Serials, Shift in Trend, Western Media Texts, Indian Viewers & Cultural Influences

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INTRODUCTION

Reception concerns both the appreciation and the rejection of a work of art. Whether it is a movie, a drama, a serial or a song, the reception of a media text is dependent much on its audience; the mass of people eager to be pleased about it, with a loud round of applause or sometimes laugh at it. The purpose of the creator of a work is to make his or her audience see what he or she saw, hear what he or she heard, feel what he or she felt and provide a passenger seat along with him/her throughout the ride. If this creator fails to do so, the work becomes a failure. Occasionally, the audience adopts their own meaning other than the ones conveyed by the creator, and these may even differ entirely from what the creator had intended in the first place.

The producers of media texts often work with an image of the audience in mind and what is that they require. Therefore, the focus on audience is advantageous, as the media must work to satisfy the audience. Audiences are not just blank sheets of paper, on which media messages can be written; members of an audience will have prior attitudes and beliefs which will determine how effective these media messages are (Abercrombie, 1996). A spectator will watch a media text from several subject positions at the same time, and in each of these viewings, a particular position will appeal to the viewer at that particular time.

A number of factors influence the spectator's experience of a particular text. One of such factors is the person's preconceived notions about the text; these notions of the viewer can severely affect his/her reception of the text. The viewer's expectations and his or her experience of the film, or said media text, can be affected by

what is known about the text's genre, its actors, writers, director or the production personnel, and also by the circumstances of its production and its marketing or merchandising. Furthermore, the particular text's exhibiting condition affects its reception ("Reception Theory Methodology," 2008; "Reception Theory," 2007). A film which is viewed on a huge screen with surround sound will have a different experience when compared to the same movie watched on a simple DVD player or on a mobile phone. The circumstances in which a person watches the film also affect how he or she experience the film - watching alone and watching with friends will have different impact on the viewer.

The social, cultural and historical factors should also be taken into consideration when dealing with reception, as it influences the audience in a much deeper and impactful manner. The impact of these particular factors may even affect the viewer in such a manner that he/she may develop an entirely different manner of reading the text, rather than sticking to the original approach intended by the creators (Hall, 1980; Hart, 1991; Morley, 1992).

The Indian scenario has always been appreciative of the various visual media. The country which has been described often by the westerners as the land of the "ancient, exotics and snake charmers," is one of the largest consumers of television serials, and has even laid records in this respect during early times of television broadcasts; when there was only a single channel and a few programs that aired. The Ramayana and Mahabharata and a hand full of other shows telecasted through Doordarshan in the Hindi language entertained the whole country; irrespective of their language, culture, caste and color (Bajaj, 2007). Indians are highly appreciative of stories relating to history, myths, legends and folktales and these can be traced back to the old ages. In case of serials too, they appreciated stories developed from these icons of their heritage. Apart from these historical, mythical and folktale materials, the viewers also welcomed the occasional horror programs. However, the most popular genre among the Indians was the soap operas (Kohli, 2003).

Soap operas or 'soaps' are synonymous with every household in India. These soaps involve the cheesy portrayal of the various issues that may take place in a typical family. It has an open-ended nature of the narrative, with stories spanning several episodes; some shows may even run for years (Casey et al., 2004). Each episode ends with a promise that the story line is to be continued in another episode. The program spends additional importance in making the setting of the show more colorful in order to attract the common audiences, especially the women folk. They are catered to the interests of the local audiences; their desires and wishes are focused on during the course of development. These soaps are filled with melodrama to the brim, and this melodrama is preferred by a far lot of Indians, irrespective of their gender. Women were central to these soaps, men were of course needed, but they remained on the periphery, to move the narrative forward (Gokulsing, 2004).

Fictions, thriller dramas and sitcoms are also cherished by young and older audiences alike and their key interest is to be entertained. This obsession with entertainment among the Indians, have contributed to the explosive growth of the entertainment industry over the past two decades; making it one of the fastest growing industries in India. Today, India boasts of being the third largest television market in the world, having more than a few hundred thousand shows and that too in many of its regional languages ("Indian Television Industry," 2009).

Even though the entertainment industry is a big thing in India and soap operas and other forms of tele-drama have become a part and parcel of the Indian audience, and they adhere to it like every other cultural and traditional practice they follow, the new era has begun to see a shift in this respect. The Western media texts, particularly the serialised television shows have penetrated into the daily routine of the Indian teenager. The viewers of these new dramatic television shows seem to increase on a daily basis. The reasons to this successful reception and appreciation of western serials or media texts

in the Indian backdrop can be attributed to not one but to a number of factors.

The Hollywood movies can be taken into consideration in this respect. These symbols of American cultural heritage have made striking impact on its viewers, irrespective of their cultural differences. The Hollywood has always kept the typical Indian at awe. The extreme action and explosive sequences along with the explicit sexual content evoked the interest of the earlier Indian viewers. But the new kids, of this particular era, are much more into detailed substance. Even though these afore mentioned characteristics of Hollywood movies pleases them, this is a generation that appreciates the entire configuration of the film. These new audiences have come into enough knowledge about the hard work put into the development of a film and are ready to appreciate every single head and hand that took part in its production. Apart from going for a movie only because of a particular actor being present, the new audiences chose movies based on other respects- directors, executive producers, music directors and so on (Abreu, 1998; Kumar, 2016).

The outstanding cast, new and experimental plots and novel audio-visual techniques and effects keep the viewers of Hollywood in check. The viewers of these media texts can't get enough of it and ends up craving for more. Western Television serials, in this respect, maintain the same quality as that of the movies and as compared to their eastern counterparts, are much more pleasing to the viewers. From the stories to the stars and to the techniques used, all maintain a high profile in their usage and execution. In simpler words, western serials are movies of the mini-screen. Rather than sticking on to a single topic, a variety of options are tested out by the creators of western media serials. From fiction, horrors, supernatural, historical and experimental to even the dramatic soap operas are among the counter, even though the latter is not preferred by a large group. The Indian viewer who prefers the Hollywood movie because of its new and experimental ways finds pleased with the Western tele-serials that offer the same and that took on a weekly basis.

Cultural penetration is another basis of this new shift in trend. It is the infiltration of one culture into another entirely different culture. The twentieth century saw the rise of globalization and spread of hybridization. Cultures began to intermingle with each other as a result of the previous colonial expeditions. The spread and mixing of cultures led to the amalgamation of the various cultural constructs. The systems and practices followed by a particular culture began to be absorbed by other cultures into themselves, and these latter cultures began to adapt them to cater their own interests.

The American cultural practices itself was an amalgamation of the various smaller traditions of people that have come and settled in the United States. But still this collective culture of the States stood out and people belonging to other cultures saw it as something sublime (Stead, 1902). The popular culture of the Western society found its way into the rest of the world through the mass media. The consumers of these media perceived the western culture with tremendous admiration. The natives of the "third world countries", like the Indians, were highly inspired by the western media and practices (Croteau, 2014). The beholders of the western culture were seen as superior and modern, and the aim of the third world native was to attain a somewhat similar position. The learning and understanding of the language was an important obstacle in the native's journey to the top and exposure to more and more media was the easiest possible way.

A similar method is approached by the generation of today. English media texts are approached as a prime medium to learn and understand the language. English language has established itself on a higher position as a result of imperialism and even though today French, Spanish, Chinese and other languages have gained prominence, English seems quite superfluous to Indians (King, 2007). The English media is still the easiest possible way to attain their desire of language learning and modernity, and movies and serials provide to their interests.

The quest for modernity and language learning further leads the viewer to the exposure of the various norms and practices of the western culture. The ideal western popular culture is effectively portrayed in the media texts and the Indian viewer who comes in contact with this new culture perceives it as something elevating and adopts it into his/her regimen. The fashion, lifestyles and manner of speaking, all find their way into the viewer. He/she absorbs it and adapts themselves to this newfound awareness; a new form of prestige. A belief rises that the viewer of English is more sophisticated. This change that has taken place in the particular viewer influences others around him and they themselves begin to follow the former's footsteps and adopt these new found practices to renew themselves into new individuals.

The western cultural penetration into India is primarily caused by the Indian admiration towards the American lifestyle. The popular culture's spread and influence have made deep impact on everyone and "being American" have become the ideal identify. The popular culture presents this Western life as the hub of the industry, as an active, adventure and sorts; everything is adrenaline pumping and testosterone oozing. And this variety of entertainment is so gratifying for the young Indian viewers, who think of their own forms of entertainment as something inferior to these western counterparts. They develop a sort of preconceived admiration towards the western media texts, even before watching them.

Another phase of admiration towards these texts is the act of character idolization. Idolizing is a normal human behavior. People have always idolized others before them. The role of an idol in any society is to give a person someone to identify with, look up to and learn from. The Indians hold the image of the "successful" westerners on a high pedestal and strive with more-or-less effort to be something they are not. This "successful" or ideal image of the Western man is seen by the Indian viewer mostly through the film or serial and he/she assumes that typical character as ideal and moreover idolizes it. The life and struggles of the character is observed and then empathized by the viewer. The success of a favorite movie or serial depends on such identification.

This admiration and character idolization all boil down into wish fulfillment; The Indian's desire to be modern and western ("Wish fulfillment," 2016). By spending more time on these texts, the viewer plunges oneself into the occidental setup that he/she so much craves for, but has no other way of attaining.

Another major factor contributing to the trend is the various cultural influences of the native country itself. India is famous for its deep rooted cultural, traditional and value beliefs. The country and its people have given importance to the ideologies like faith, religion and family and so on. It is a part of the cultural heritage of the country, and these ideologies, which have been practiced from the ancient times, are still inherent in their day to day schedules. Their quest for modernity is also challenged by this deep-seated philosophy. The case of media texts is not far from different; these philosophical principles govern each and every form of text in the country- books, films, serials and others. Their reception is determined heavily by this factor. Serials have been going on in India since the second half of the twentieth century. A host of new serials even get released every year when a previous one ends. The plot and theme of these serials in most cases may have nothing new. Of the ten serials taken, nine of them deals with domestic problems and only one will be dealing with a varying theme and topic. Still there is good number of viewers watching each new serial telecasted.

These serials or soap operas focus more on the issues related to familial and the household affairs. Married couples, relations between family members, jealous relatives, evil plotting, illicit affairs, illegitimate children, and money troubles were all there. Even though the topics and issues are clichéd, the emotional appeals in these soaps are high and they are in great sync with the native audiences; who can easily relate to them. And it is one of the major reasons that people continue to watch them even after all these years (Munshi, 2010).

The Western media texts/ serials now seem to have focused more on this pattern. Novel plotlines, methodological advances and experimental techniques are an exceptional feature of the western serials; along with this, new shows have begun giving prominence to the concept of family relations, religious significances and other ideologies. This new advancement may have risen as a result of the cultural influences of the east on the west, and is having a comparatively profound impact on the western ideology and thought, as it is reflected through their popular media. Serials and movies in this day and age show signs of these within them.

In this regard, two of the most popular American television series *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* can be taken into consideration. Both these shows are huge successes worldwide, and also have a faithful fan base and following in India. With entirely different plots, themes, settings and technical usages, both show variety in entertainment. *Breaking Bad* portrays the journey and struggle of a simple school teacher from a protagonist to an antagonist, in an attempt to provide for his family. This show that ran for five seasons dealt primarily with a sensitive theme- drug production and money making. Apart from this intense topic on the crust, the show dealt with family relations, mentor-student relations, and struggles of the characters in the face of a terminal illness and their near death experiences after adopting a life of crime (Gilligan, 2008).

Game of Thrones on the other hand deals with a mythical world of Westeros, with its seven kingdoms and meticulously sketched characters fighting for the Iron throne. There is nothing that this show does not leave out. Be it pain, lust, love, mercy, loyalty or religion, every episode takes the viewer on a unique journey. The major topics of obsession/quest for power, duty and honor, society and class, justice and judgment, strength and skill, memory and the past, trust and betrayal, evolution and growing up of the characters and the familial relations are focused on in the show (Benioff, 2011).

The concept of family and relations is upheld with great significance in both these shows. The chief theme of *Breaking Bad* is the protagonist's struggle to provide for his family and furthermore protect his loved ones from the ghosts of his secret life. The relationship between the protagonist and his family members and his love for each and every one of them is dealt with slowly and carefully over the course of action of the series (Fichtenmayer, 2013). Similar is the case in *Game of Thrones*, the plot revolves around a number of families, termed as houses, of which four of them are given prime importance. The course of the show builds up on the relation between the members of a certain family as well as their relation towards members of other families. Each episode of both shows built up on these relationships and commitments between the characters, making the audience grow closer and empathize with the characters.

Breaking Bad successfully depicts the standard of living and the numerous pains within an average American household as well as a glance into the urban culture of the country. Poverty and the struggle to make both ends meet, drug addiction, insecurity of life, gang wars, rivalries, murders and other unacceptable evils that prevail in the society is clearly evident in the series. The shocking effect of these social evils on an individual, and later on the people who surround him, is the main concern of this serial. The 'American dream' to be a successful man is an underlying motive in the show. *Game of Thrones*, in contrast, creates a world similar to that which is seen in the movie, *The Lord of the Rings*, a mythical medieval era is seen with kings, queens, knights and even dragons and other supernatural creatures. The glories and valor of the era are portrayed with great fashion; along with the minor clashes as well as the major battles between the kingdoms taking the viewer to a distant world and thereby catering to his/her escapist mentality. Another significant characteristic of this show is its depiction of the different gods and religions alongside the main plotline. The presence of a number of gods

and religions leads to the disagreement between the believers of these religions among one another, based on their conflicting ideologies; which an Indian viewer can easily identify oneself with (Fowler, 2016; Hughes, 2014).

Keeping the intense modernistic techniques of media making aside, *Breaking Bad* can be seen as a modern morality tale and *Game of Thrones* as a Mythical folk tale (Kenny, 2014; Foster et al., 2016). The strong weight of the emotional and dramatic elements is present abundantly in both these series and they appeal immensely to the Indian viewer. Myths, folktales, histories and legends along with value teachings are all part of the long Indian tradition. Even after the process of modernization, an Indian has never fully shed these deep-seated traditions wholeheartedly; they are still contained within, silently judging the person's decisions and tastes.

The struggles that are faced by the characters and the dramatic emphasis on relationships, especially the family relations, make the Indian viewer identify himself with the show and make the appreciation of it much easier. The viewer feels very much connected to show and senses it as something that satisfies him/her completely; by catering to the modernistic desires of present-day entertainment as well as satisfying the viewer's innate yearning for his own cultural and philosophical entities.

Aside from the aesthetical and cultural influences on the viewers, the spread of the Internet has contributed substantially to the reception of western media texts. The World Wide Web which has become an unavoidable aspect of human life, have an immense sway on the teenagers, who spend most of their time surfing the internet; and this is not too different in the Indian scenario, which is the world's second largest online market (Thakur, 2016). Teens spent countless hours online and are subjected to many forms of online media exposure. The numerous groups and pages within the social media sites, discussion forums, the media review websites and other online services have provided a platform for the users to get to know more about the western shows and programs, among other things. The information regarding these programs that are passed through the web has a much larger scope than any other media.

The groups and the discussion forums on the internet are particularly notable for their significant impact on its participants. These platforms make the best out of the topic that is put in discussion through it. Because of the presence of a large number of participants, a large number of opinions and ideas, both individual and collective, are collected on the topic of interest. Consequently, when the topics of western television serials are put into question, a person is flooded with so many answers and opinions that he/she is unknowingly pressured into watching these new shows. The openness of discussions held and the presence of peers in these platforms pave way for newcomers to a particular text; it attracts and prompts them to watch these programs. A form of crowd mentality is developed and is clearly evident in such cases. A particular person's interest is influenced because of the interests of others surrounding him/her. Personal tastes are sidelined and new ones are adopted, so as to please the peers and become one among them (Deyaa, 2015; Metzger, 2008; Tatum et al., 2017).

The groups, forums and WebPages act as the primary stage of influence that expose the person to these new media and the rest of the internet deals with the later stage. Every detail regarding the particular text is available online. The user can get a whole lot of information and other data regarding the text in a split second. From every single episode of a particular serial to critical reviews, magazines and other articles relating to it are within the reach of the person, irrespective of his/her location. An Indian viewer of western television serials can get magazines and other materials pertaining to it through the internet without much haste. The provision to watch shows in real time as it is telecasted in the US, up-to-date information regarding popular events such as Comic-Cons and other programs, which is a privilege of the

American (western) audience, are all available within the Indian viewer's reach. The availability of all these online facilities makes the reception of these western media texts by the native viewer much less complicated and more user-friendly in this modern day.

CONCLUSIONS

Summing it all up, reception of the western media text by the Indian audience is not limited by just one aspect, but by quite a few; and it is also dependent on the time and age. The Indian audiences' quest for modernity is a key reason that has influenced the cause of drifting into the Western media. Hollywood movies and serials have invoked in the viewer desires of an ideal modern place, which he seeks to attain. This quest is satisfied by further indulging oneself more and more into it and this indulgence provides a kind of solace to the viewer. This desire has risen due to the western cultural penetration over the preceding years which have made the viewer develop the sense of admiration towards the west. It is a major factor, but, it is not the only reason that affects the audiences' reception. From the outside, it may seem that the love for the new trend may be a direct outcome of the easterners' "quest for modernity" but deep within nothing has changed much, the traditions and cultural practices still control the typical Indian. His traditional beliefs/philosophies have an inherent affect within him when dealing with reception. It is with the contentment of these aforesaid demands, and with the help of the Internet, that the Western media have broken ground in the Indian scenario.

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